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MIAs — haunting legacy of Vietnam

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In 1980, an escaped Vietnamese mortician told United States officials that the remains of 400 US servicemen were warehoused in Hanoi.

The mortician passed a lie-detector test, and the Pentagon today judges his information "very credible." But Vietnam insists that such a warehouse does not exist.

As this illustrates, US intelligence believes the Hanoi government knows more about missing US citizens than it lets on. Vietnam discloses such information in bits and pieces, US officials complain. The latest disclosure came Sunday, when Hanoi promised to return the bodies of 26 Americans killed during the Vietnam war.

At issue, for the most part, are the whereabouts of the remains of US servicemen. Officially, the Defense Department symbolically lists only one American as a prisoner of war who is still alive.

As of July 1, 2,464 Americans were officially listed as "unaccounted for in Southeast Asia," according to Maj. Keith Schneider, a Pentagon spokesman. The Air Force is the service with the largest contingent of missing, 924. Forty-two of those unaccounted for are civilians.

The percentage of unaccounted-for servicemen is actually much lower for the Vietnam conflict than it was for World War II, or Korea. The bodies of 22 percent of Americans killed in World War II were never recovered, or at least never identified. In Korea, 18 percent of servicemen listed killed were never found. The comparable figure for Vietnam is about 4 percent.

The unusual circumstances of the Vietnam war, however, have helped make the Southeast Asia missing a persistent issue in the US, experts note. Because the US did not win the war, it has not had access to battlefields to search for remains. The stubbornness of the Vietnamese victors has frustrated the families of the missing, say officials of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

The Paris Peace Agreement, which ended the Vietnam war, contained an article providing for the free exchange of information about missing servicemen and return of all remains. But Hanoi has acted only grudgingly, US sources believe, because of anger over the question of US reconstruction aid to Vietnam.

Since the end of the war, Vietnam has turned over the remains of about 100 US soldiers, sailors, and airmen, a State Department official says. Most have been in small batches of six or so, and each time Hanoi disavows knowledge of any further bodies. Thus the sudden offer to hand over 26 remains and provide information on six others came as something of a surprise. It represents the largest such return since the fall of Saigon.

Allan Goodman, associate dean of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, says he is mystified by the Vietnamese gesture. It may be a reaction to all the poor publicity Hanoi received during commemorations of the 10th anniversary of the war's end, he says.

It is also "the most immediate, tangible thing they can do" to improve relations with the US, he notes.

A State Department official agrees the action may be part of a campaign to improve relations with the US, and adds that with the National League of Families convention coming up in a few weeks, now is an opportune time for such a move.

On the emotional issue of whether Hanoi may be withholding not just information, but living prisoners of war (POWs), a State Department spokesman adds only that "we investigate all reports, but none has been yet confirmed."

Since the war's end, US intelligence has received 774 reports of firsthand sightings of US POWs in Southeast Asia, says the Pentagon. Eighty-four percent have been resolved to the Pentagon's satisfaction. Either they correlated to an individual whose fate has since been established, or they were pure fabrications, in the view of the US military.

That leaves 123 reports of US POWs unresolved. Asked whether this means the Pentagon believes there are still Americans alive in southeast Asia, Pentagon spokesman Major Schneider says, "Thus far we have not been able to prove that Americans are being detained. . . . The information available to us precludes us from ruling out that possibility."

All US servicemen listed as missing from the Vietnam conflict, however, have been declared dead, except one. That one — Air Force Col. Charles Shelton — is symbolically listed as a POW, by order of the secretary of the Air Force.

The National League of Families, which has done much to keep the POW/MIA issue alive, says "it would be very irresponsible" to rule out the possibility of live POWs, according to Mary Louise Scott, an official of the group.

Staff writer George Moffett III also contributed to this article.

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